

## **Remarks by President McAleese at the opening of the 12th Annual Conference of the European Network of Ombudsmen for Children**

Wednesday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008

Dia dhíbh, a cháirde go léir. Tá mé iontach sásta bheith anseo libh inniu.

Good morning everybody and thank you for your warm welcome to your conference. It is my great pleasure, in turn, to welcome all of you - and in particular those of you who have travelled great distances ó to be here today. It is quite a privilege for Ireland to be your hosts and

I am delighted to offer each of you the traditional Irish welcome, céad míle fáilte - one hundred thousand welcomes. My thanks to Emily [Logan, our Ombudsman for Children] for inviting me to the opening of this important conference.

The words conference, network, Ombudsman are three relatively workmanlike, professional words which gather huge meaning and momentum when gathered around the words ófor childrenö. The more high-powered this conference, the stronger this network, the more ombudspersons there are in this field the better are the lived lives and the prospects for good lives, of our children, Europe's children, Europe's future.

We have high hopes and high ambitions for those children and we desire for them a secure childhood, where they are loved, nurtured, protected, educated and supported safely through those years of dependency to adulthood. We know that is not how life pans out for many children. From their earliest moments in the womb they can be unwitting victims of the avoidable actions of others and the unavoidable ups and downs of nature at work in the world, from the children born with foetal alcohol syndrome or HIV, to children born with disabilities or into families where illness makes them care-worn carers before their time, or where poverty or dysfunction reduces their life's chances even before their little lives are launched. Some will transcend adversity with remarkable resilience, others will sink into half-lived lives.

We build many different kinds of fortification around our children to protect them and, in particular, to protect the most vulnerable. We have a host of laws, institutions, voluntary and state organisations, government

departments, international treaties, we have the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international human rights instrument, and the network they create between them is those children's safety net. The smaller and tighter its mesh, the less are the chances of any child slipping through to that underworld of vulnerable silence where their lives can leach away cruelly and unnoticed.

The truth is that children need adult champions, courageous advocates, accessible defenders and vindicators of their rights. Your vocation is to be such champions, to pierce that membrane of silence, to shape the adverse childhood experience into words and actions that lift their lives out of the shadows and into the light. You work in a complex world where children can be in one continent this morning and another this afternoon.

Here in Ireland our once relatively homogeneous society has been opened up very rapidly in recent years by inward migration from all over the world. Families have come here in the hope of better lives and they have made a huge contribution to our economy and our civic life. Among them are many children trying valiantly to cope with a new homeland, new language, new schools, new friends, different attitudes and customs.

They may be desperately homesick or lonely for old friends and family left behind. Their sheer courage and determination is often overlooked or simply taken for granted. We have children who arrive alone on our shores, children who are vulnerable to trafficking and abuse.

All these new children are now our care, our kith and kin for they are the human building blocks of tomorrow's Ireland and we need them to be strong, healthy, educated, confident and fulfilled. We already know only too well the appalling price paid over a lifetime for a childhood mired in abuse. The story has been told and retold through the tragic lives of many children abused in what were meant to be caring institutions. We know too that for many children the family home can be a place of relentless misery rather than refuge. We know the awesome capacity children have for suffering in silence.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires more of us than that we merely protect children from harm or vindicate them when abused. It talks about listening to children, respecting their views and ensuring that, in all matters concerning them, their best interests are a primary consideration, that their voices and views are given a chance to be

coherently articulated and developed. There is a very telling phrase used by disability groups on the subject of inclusion - "nothing about me without me". It is a principle that pervades the approach and work of the Children's Ombudsman here in Ireland, for Emily, in her work, is advised by a Youth Advisory Panel of 22 young persons ranging in age from 13 to 18 years of age. The establishment of Offices of Ombudsman for Children across Europe holds great hope that Europe's children and young people, especially those most marginalised will be drawn meaningfully into the mainstream, where their problems and perspectives will be taken seriously.

The words of our own Irish Proclamation of Independence that dates from 1916 speaks of our resolve as a Republic to guarantee religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens and to cherish all the children of the nation equally.

To achieve this core goal, this test of us as a people and as a republic of equals, we need the best of advice and the best of support from you, Europe's experts in the area of children's advocacy and protection. You in turn need each other and forums like this conference so that you can share experience, wisdom and insight and, at the same time, strengthen the base of friendship, mutuality and collegiality that any integrated network needs to be fluent and effective. The more effective your network, the more all of us can have faith in our capacity to cherish our children equally.

I wish Emily every success in her forthcoming role as chairperson of your network. I have no doubt that she will be as successful in her international role as she has been in her domestic role here. I wish you all the very best of success in your discussions here in Dublin, and renewed energy for the return home to your daily work at the front line of child advocacy and child protection in Europe.

Thank you.